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Ludwig W. Adamec

The dignity of work

*In 1938, I was 14 years old and had finished eight years of public school in Vienna, my hometown, when Austria became part of "Greater Germany".*

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I felt grown up and lived with my mother, my father having passed away when I was five years old. I suffered from "wanderlust", the desire to see the world, but as a child of the Depression, there seemed to be no chance that I would ever see my dream come true. Nevertheless, I studied a little English, just in case I might make it sometime.

Finally free from the regimentation of school, I was happy to learn that the government was paying unemployment support for anyone fourteen years and older. Great, I thought, money for nothing! I immediately registered for a weekly payment of a few Mark. But several weeks later, a physician appeared at the unemployment office and proclaimed everyone "fit". "Fit for what?" I asked. "Agricultural labor", he replied. I was about average in weight and height, but did not feel up to that kind of work. I was told that only if I found an apprenticeship could I avoid being drafted. I was fortunate to find an apprentice position as tool and die maker, a profession which was encouraged by the government at the time.

In my spare time I was very fond of watching American movies and I became a fervent lover of jazz. With some of my friends I would visit a dance school on Saturday nights and occasionally met with friends during the week to play American records. We dressed in a particular fashion: jackets long to the knees, narrow pants with high cuffs, and long neckties with a small knot. We were "swing boys and girls" who were subject to scorn by the general public. One time, I was standing in front of a cinema when a company of Hitler Youth marched by. Suddenly, the leader commanded "eyes right!" and then shouted "who stands there" and the boys shouted in unison, "a Schlurf". Schlurf was the Viennese term for swing boys. Naturally, I did not want to join the Hitler Youth.

My mother died in 1940 when I was 16 years old and left me an orphan. I did not have a close relative willing to be my guardian and I felt old enough to take care of myself. But minors were not permitted to live by themselves, especially if they were playing this outlandish music and having friends over for dancing and jam sessions. The good life came to a quick end. One morning I woke up and went down to the street when someone told me that several of my friends had been arrested. It seems I had slept so well that I did not hear the knock on the door.

I decided to flee. I got on my bike and left Vienna for Passau and there I decided that I should try to escape to Switzerland. It seemed a little too far to go by bike, so I sold the bicycle and went by train to Friedrichshafen and then by ferry across Lake Konstanz to the city of Konstanz. Half of the city was in Switzerland [1] and in the German half, unlike in the rest of Germany, there was no blackout. By the time I got there, I had spent all my money and, looking for shelter, I went to the Red Cross. A friendly lady immediately took me to a guest house, got me a room, which she locked from the outside, and left.

My misgivings were proved correct, when the next morning a man from the Gestapo came and took me to his office. He interrogated me and wanted to know whether I had come to the city to cross into Switzerland. When I did not confess, he took me to the city jail where I was incarcerated for about two weeks. It was a fearful experience for me. After I was freed because there were no requests for my arrest from Vienna, I decided that I could not cross the Swiss border and returned to my beloved Vienna. I was home for only two days when I was taken to an orphanage.

Then began a period when I repeatedly escaped from custody and was sent to a reform school. Supported by friends, who were awed by my "bravery", I lived without ration cards and permanent shelter until I was eventually arrested by the ubiquitous police checks in Vienna and returned to the institution. Out again, I made another attempt to leave Germany at the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian border, but was arrested by the Gestapo and transported to jail in Vienna.

After serving a term of seven months in prison, I was moved to a Gestapo prison in the Rossauer barracks. I landed in a large cell which held about 35 prisoners who, I was told, were waiting to be freed or sent to a concentration camp. People had heard of "labor camps", for asocial persons "to teach them the dignity of work", but no one seemed aware of the existence of extermination camps. For me, the first inkling of danger came when a tall handsome Roma returned to our cell, crying "Auschwitz my death". I found out that he had escaped from Dachau and was told that he was to be sent to that death camp.

The procedure required that each case was to be decided in Berlin which usually took about a month. In my case I was summoned after only a few days and told that I would be sent to the juvenile camp Moringen "where they will teach you to behave". While they were taking care of administrative details, one man entered the room and announced that another prisoner, whom they had sent off only a few weeks before, had died of circulatory disease. The Gestapo men laughed and enjoyed the joke.

Every few days an official would call the names of prisoners who were either freed or transported to unknown destinations. My turn came and, with some 16 other prisoners, I was transported to the station Westbahnhof. Handcuffed and guarded by SS guards and two dogs, we were marched to a special train with cells the size of a telephone booth. Four or five men to a cell, I travelled to Linz, Prague, Asch [2], and finally Moringen. At each town we were held for a few days, to be organized into new groups, according to the destination of prisoners. When we were marched to our train in Prague, one prisoner managed to open his cuffs and jumped under a train which had stopped in the station. I don't know if he managed to escape.

I arrived in Moringen with four or five other prisoners. We were asked about our personal data, one at a time, while the others had to do knee bends or pushups. We were given our uniforms and marched to the Observation Block for new arrivals. To save on the cost of guarding the prisoners, each block was headed by a block supervisor who was an SS officer who delegated much authority to a prisoner, the block elder. The block elder at the time of my arrival died a year later – he was accused of stealing food and did not survive his punishment. The man he robbed was a classmate of mine who also died later.

My block was located in one of the main brick buildings. There was a dormitory with double-decker bunks. At six in the morning, at the command of "everybody up!" we jumped out of the beds, made our beds according to specific instruction, and washed at rows of faucets with cold water. Then we marched to the yard where we were counted and regrouped according to work assignment. Those who were sick, went to the hospital group – they had better be sick, or they were punished for trying to avoid work for the day. Prisoners occasionally resorted to self mutilation, to be moved to a hospital. This was considered sabotage and punished.

The first week in Moringen, I was assigned to work in a salt mine, which was used for storage of ammunition, and later in a quarry. Fortunately, I hurt my foot at a time when a new factory, called "Piller", was started and I was assigned to the new job. I was among eight prisoners with some experience in metalwork and each was assigned four or five helpers to build what were rumored to be giant searchlight assemblies. Eventually, we worked alternate 12-hour day or night shifts, from seven in the morning till seven at night. A Viennese prisoner hoped to get to a hospital from where he could write to his family for food parcels. He asked me to start the metal cutter, so that he could cut the fingers of his left hand.

Only I had permission to operate the machine and I refused his request. I later met him in Vienna and he was thankful that I did not comply with his request. A sadist SS officer, whom we had given the name of a Russian (or German) tank, spent his time at "Piller" beating prisoners. "Where is your work place?" he would ask. "I come from the toilet". Bad excuse. One had to stand in attention until he got tired of beating, or you started spitting out a tooth.

After we returned to our quarters in the evening, we assembled for roll-call which consisted of examination of prisoners for cleanliness of body and garments. The beds had to be made in a particular style. Shoes had to be clean – including the soles – torn uniforms had to be patched. Appells were a major means of chicanery. Prisoners who worked in the quarries were at a disadvantage, they needed more time to clean up. Those who were cited for infractions faced various punishments: lashes, deprivation of food, or sleeping on bare metal beds. Osterman, our block supervisor, held indoctrination classes each evening, and prisoners who did not remember his history lessons would suffer. Punishments were meted out in front of the assembled prisoners. Often, an officer reputed to be an expert, administered the lashes. The prisoner had to count the strokes. If in his agony he stopped counting, he continued to be beaten, until he got his numbers correct. Then he had to acknowledge his punishment, saying: "Ten strokes received with thanks".

Living on a subsistence level, getting repeatedly into trouble, was dangerous for your health. Some unfortunates, who did not have the stamina to survive, were walking skeletons – *Musulmanen*, as we called them. Some prisoners got Red Cross parcels, or food packages from relatives, but those were the fortunate few. When we started the 12-hour shifts, we got all our meals at the same time. We gorged ourselves on cabbage soup or, our favorite, pea soup (which was more substantial), but then we had to wait 24 hours before we got food again. Except for those with access to extra food, we were all undernourished.

After months of observation, prisoners were transferred to one of seven blocks. I was sent to block "E" which was for those capable of rehabilitation. This block was cleaner and whenever some commission came to inspect the camp, they were shown block "E". I continued for a time at "Piller", but then got a job as a cleaner in the SS barracks. My predecessor made the mistake of acquiring a signet ring which was fashioned at "Piller" from a brass nut. This was sabotage. After the man was thoroughly beaten, the block supervisor asked for a volunteer for the job. No one volunteered, although I did later, because I felt that it would improve my chance of survival. One could organize food and collect cigarette butts, which were a medium of trade. We were two Viennese in charge of the barracks.

There were two types of SS men: the officers, usually Reichsdeutsche [3], and the guards who were Volksdeutsche [4], Germans drafted into the SS in the Balkans. Only the officers were in direct contact with the prisoners. The Volksdeutsche, some of whom spoke German only haltingly, were the guards, standing in summer and winter on the perimeter of the camp and the various places of work.

One time my survival seemed threatened: I used to listen to Anglo-American broadcasts in the guard quarters, and told selected friends about the

news. Some prisoners at "Piller" discussed the political situation in the toilet, rejoicing that the Allies were about to take Bonn on the Rhine. They were overheard by an SS guard who had sneaked into the toilet to chase the prisoners back to work. He arrested them and they were marched to the head of the Sicherheitsdienst [5] and one after another told from whom he had heard the news. It took three days until I was summoned and confronted with the man whom I originally gave the information. The SD chief received me with a diabolical smile: "Now we got you!" People were executed for listening to enemy broadcasts. What saved me was that I had access to German newspapers, and I read that Pryn on the Rhine [6] was threatened. When confronted with my accuser, I said it was Pryn not Bonn. Bonn – Pryn, Bonn – Pryn, he stuttered – the SD chief chose to believe me.

The Allies were approaching and he was a resident of Moringen – it was in his interest to believe me. Any survivors might seek revenge. He asked me what I thought about enlisting redeemable prisoners into the SS to make a last stand against Allied troops. I was honest, telling him that most of us don't know how to shoot a gun, and that, after many years imprisonment, most would want to escape at the first possible moment.

This is what I did after we were evacuated some 20 kilometers to Göttingen. With another Viennese man, I walked through the front line at night, passed American soldiers who did not stop us when I explained that "We are your friends, prisoners from a concentration camp." But that is another story.

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[1] The city of Kreuzlingen.

[2] Aš: north-west Bohemian town on the German border.

[3] With German citizenship.

[4] Germans with non-German citizenship.

[5] SD - Security Service.

[6] The precise name of the town can no longer be remembered.